

Defining the Sacred Songs

Genre, Tradition and the Post-Critical
Interpretation of the Psalms

Harry P. Nasuti





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PREFACE

The Psalms have been at the center of my scholarly interests ever since I first studied them with Samuel Terrien at Union Theological Seminary (New York) more than two decades ago. They were the subject of the doctoral dissertation I wrote under the direction of Robert R. Wilson at Yale, subsequently published in the Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series as *Tradition History and the Psalms of Asaph*. A number of the undergraduate and graduate courses that I have taught at LeMoyne College and Fordham University have focused on the Psalms, and these texts will undoubtedly continue to both challenge and inspire me for many years to come.

The present work represents over 10 years of wrestling with the question of the role that genre should play in the current post-Gunkel era of Psalms scholarship. While the long period of this book's development is to some degree due to a series of time-consuming administrative appointments, it is also a tribute to the vibrant nature of Psalms research at the present time. The continued stimulus of contemporary Psalms scholars often required me to rethink and extend my own work. What follows is obviously heavily indebted to the work of such scholars, as well as to the work of those who preceded them in the Psalms' long interpretive history.

This book also owes a great deal to a number of institutions and individuals who have provided me with many different kinds of support. For financial support, I am grateful first of all to the Catholic Biblical Association of America. A Young Scholars' Fellowship from the Association in 1988 made possible the first research on this book. I am also grateful to Fordham University for two faculty fellowships, during which time much of the present work took shape. During one of these fellowships, I had the privilege of residing at the Ratisbonne Christian Center of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem and working at the libraries of the Ecole Biblique and Hebrew University. To all of these institutions, I extend my sincere thanks.

Parts of this work were read at various scholarly conferences over the past 11 years, at which occasions they profited from the feedback of a number of my colleagues. An earlier version of chapter two was presented at the 1988 national meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, while part of chapter six was presented at the 1993 national meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association. A draft of chapter three was discussed by the Continuing Seminar on Literary Theory and Hermeneutics at the 1989 meeting of the latter Association. I am indeed grateful to all those scholars who gave me the benefit of their insights at these times.

In a similar way, I would like to express my appreciation to all the students who have taken my Psalms courses over the years. Their questions and comments have often caused me to clarify and revise what has resulted in this work. To one of these students, Kenneth Share, I owe a special debt of gratitude for his extremely careful and insightful proof-reading of the present work. I look forward to the stimulus of future students for further insights on these and other biblical texts.

Among my many supportive colleagues at Fordham, I am especially grateful to Mary C. Callaway, my Old Testament colleague and current chair, both for her unfailing personal and official support and for the continuing inspiration of her passionate engagement with the biblical text. Sincere thanks are also due to Robert B. Robinson, Professor of Old Testament at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, for his specific comments on various parts of this work and for the many heated discussions about hermeneutics we have shared since we met in graduate school. For helpful advice on certain aspects of chapter two, I am indebted to Professor Nicholas Constatas of Harvard University. I am also most grateful to my editor, Miss Rebecca Cullen, for her careful work with this manuscript and her patience with its author.

In a more general way, I am grateful to Professors Brevard S. Childs, James L. Kugel, and Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm. of Yale, Harvard, and Duke Universities for their example and their encouragement throughout the years. Special thanks are also due to Joseph Browne, S.J., whose wise guidance has seen me through many rough spots in the writing of this book and beyond.

My deepest thanks, of course, must go to those who have suffered through the writing of this book in the most intimate way—namely, my family. My son, Peter, grew up hearing about this work, and I am truly

indebted to him for being a continual reminder of what really matters in life. In my wife, Jane, I have been shown God's grace beyond any deserving and all measure. To both of these most important persons in my life, I dedicate this book with sincere gratitude and with love.

ABBREVIATIONS

BZAW	Beihefte zur ZAW
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
ConBOT	Coniectanea biblica, Old Testament
HSS	Harvard Semitic Studies
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i> , Supplement Series
JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
NIB	<i>New Interpreter's Bible</i> (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).
SBLDS	SBL Dissertation Series
TDNT	Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (eds.), <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> (trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; 10 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–)
TU	Texte und Untersuchungen
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps no book of the Bible has been able to sound both so broadly and so deeply as the book of Psalms. While some biblical books have waxed and waned in popularity throughout history, the psalms seem to have remained broadly accessible to every age of believers. There has never been an age in the history of Judaism and Christianity which has not found itself attracted to the book of Psalms.

This attraction has been as deep within each age as it has been broad throughout the ages. Even though other times may not have been as likely to hear laborers singing the psalms in the fields as that of St Jerome, these texts have always figured large in the personal piety of individual believers. Certainly, they have played a consistently important role in these believers' communal liturgical practice. In addition, the psalms have been a major concern for every generation of scholars and commentators. Indeed, they have often called forth such scholars' most creative and perceptive efforts.

When one prays or studies the psalms, one finds oneself in a wide and glorious company. It is a company that ranges from the desert fathers for whom the psalms formed an essential part of their being, to young children for whom Psalm 23 is one of their earliest introductions to Scripture. It is a company that encompasses an exceptionally large number of theological giants, men like Augustine, Jerome, Luther, Calvin and Bellarmine, as well as Saadiah Gaon, Rashi, ibn Ezra and David Qimḥi. And it is a company that even in our ever more specialized age includes both theologians such as Barth, Bonhoeffer, and Buber and biblical scholars such as Gunkel, Mowinckel, Westermann and Brueggemann.

It is, however, not enough to celebrate the breadth and depth of the psalms' reception throughout their history. It is also necessary to reckon with the rich diversity of this reception. For while all ages unite in

extolling the virtues and central importance of the psalms, these same ages display no such accord as to how these texts are to be understood. One should, of course, not expect a consensus over such a wide range of centuries. Nevertheless, the many interpretive voices surrounding the psalms pose a dilemma for the modern interpreter that should not be underestimated.

What, after all, is one to do with the theological giant of another age who insists that the bone-chilling approval of infanticide found at the end of Psalm 137 is really an exhortation to eliminate one's small sins by dashing them against the rock of Christ? How is one to deal with that other theological giant who sees the psalms not as prayer but as an alternate exposition of the law? What does one do with the widely accepted traditional view that David was the author of all the psalms, even those which reflect events many years later than David's own time? And what is one to make out of those expositors from Augustine to Bonhoeffer who see Jesus as the true speaker of the psalms?

*The Changing World of Modern Psalms Scholarship:
The Central Question of Genre*

Until recently, the answer of mainline scholarship to such questions has been clear. While agreeing with previous interpreters' exaltation of the psalms and even respecting their endeavors as appropriate and fruitful for their own times, modern scholars have tended to say that their efforts were basically misguided and of little consequence for the present.

As a result, the study of such interpreters has been felt to have only historical interest, a way of understanding previous ages but not of understanding the psalms themselves. For the latter task, only the dominant historical-critical approach (particularly in its form-critical manifestation) has been accepted as an appropriate method. Though modern scholars have often been aware of (and even influenced by) the work of their more traditional predecessors, their first allegiance has clearly been to more contemporary critical methods.

Indeed, the book of Psalms may well be seen as one of the great success stories of modern biblical criticism. It is almost impossible to conceive of any twentieth-century psalms commentary that does not reflect the form-critical advances of Hermann Gunkel, at least in its more

definitional aspects.¹ Both liberal and conservative works routinely use such categories as lament, hymn and thanksgiving to describe the various psalms, often with wide levels of agreement across the standard ideological spectrum. Most annotated Bibles reflect these genre categorizations as well, thus bringing form-critical definitions of the psalms into the consciousness of even the most casual of Bible readers.

This is, of course, not to say that twentieth-century psalms scholarship has been merely a slavish repetition of Gunkel's work. Certainly, scholars such as Sigmund Mowinckel and Claus Westermann have proposed significant modifications to fundamental aspects of Gunkel's system. Moreover, not every commentator has stressed the full nature of all that Gunkel envisioned by form criticism. In particular, Gunkel's crucial concept of life setting has often received a somewhat perfunctory treatment.

Nevertheless, even if one were to limit the modern appropriation of Gunkel's system to its most formal taxonomic aspects, one should not underestimate how useful that system has been for modern interpreters. By defining individual psalms according to the larger category of genre, the modern interpreter has been able to see each psalm in the context of a group of similar psalms. The awareness of this group's common elements has in turn allowed for a sharper recognition of the unique aspects of individual psalms. Form criticism has, at the very least, provided a literary context out of which one can interpret each individual psalm.

In view of this strong consensus as to the utility of Gunkel's system, certain recent movements in psalms scholarship are worthy of note. Particularly interesting are attempts by authors such as Westermann and, especially, Walter Brueggemann to propose different groupings for the psalms. To be sure, neither scholar has any desire to challenge the overall thrust of Gunkel's system. Instead, both view themselves as moving beyond Gunkel to a more inclusive theological level.

Westermann and Brueggemann differ as to how they envision this theological move beyond Gunkel. What is, however, common to both scholars is that this theological move has resulted in a change as to the grouping of the psalms in terms of genre. While these authors will be

1. Gunkel's two major form-critical masterpieces on the psalms are: *Die Psalmen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1929) and *Einleitung in die Psalmen: Die Gattungen der religiösen Lyrik Israels, zu Ende geführt von Joachim Begrich* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1933).

discussed in detail throughout this book, a brief overview at this point might help to illustrate the significance of their departures from the standard form-critical consensus.

Along these lines, Westermann has tended to de-emphasize the connection of form to life setting and to focus instead on the relationship between the larger theological categories of praise and lament.² It is these larger categories which he sees as basic to the confessional life of ancient Israel and those who follow in its footsteps. For Westermann, Israel is especially characterized by praise for God's specific actions on its behalf, a praise that Westermann calls 'declarative' in contrast to the praise that is 'descriptive' of God's more general characteristics.

Important here is the way these new categories cut across Gunkel's genres. Thus, for example, Westermann's declarative praise may be seen to undergird even the psalms of lament, since the latter genre both calls for the type of specific divine intervention celebrated in that type of praise and even anticipates such praise in its own structure.

Brueggemann uses Westermann's interplay of praise and lament to construct a threefold system of orientation, disorientation and new orientation.³ Psalms of orientation may be seen to use descriptive praise to celebrate an ordered world and a trustworthy God, while psalms of disorientation (especially the lament) describe the loss of that ordered world and call for God to act. Psalms of new orientation, on the other hand, use declarative praise to recount how God acted to overcome the distress of the person praying.

As in the case of Westermann, Gunkel's genres are not entirely forsaken by Brueggemann, though they are revised in accord with the latter's larger theological interests. Brueggemann also is similar to Westermann in that these theological interests affect the way that he sees Gunkel's key category of life setting.

Again, it is clear that neither Westermann or Brueggemann sees his work as overthrowing Gunkel's basic system and the form-critical consensus. Nevertheless, both have proposed major modifications as to

2. See his analysis in *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta, VA: John Knox Press, 1981), as well as the detailed discussion later in this work.

3. For an outline of this system, see especially Brueggemann's article, 'Psalms and the Life of Faith: A Suggested Typology of Function', *JSOT* 20 (1980), pp. 3-32, and his book, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984). These works undergird much of what Brueggemann has written on the psalms elsewhere.

how one groups the psalms into categories and how one defines these categories. What has prompted these developments?

On the one hand, these changes may be traced to a normal refinement and furthering of the form-critical agenda. Westermann's work, in particular, may be seen as an attempt to realize Gunkel's call for a literary history of forms in ancient Israel. Much of his work on the psalms is devoted to a description of the changes that the genres of praise and lament undergo throughout Israelite history. Surely, Gunkel would have approved of the general thrust of Westermann's work, even if he might have argued for different genre categories and more sustained attention to life setting.

There is, however, another side to these recent developments, one which is particularly evident in the work of Brueggemann, though it is to be found in Westermann's writings as well. This other factor is the manifestly theological concern of both authors. For both Westermann and Brueggemann, the way one groups the psalms has theological, as well as *religionsgeschichtliche* significance. Such theological interests were not absent in Gunkel, but they were clearly not his dominant concern.⁴

It will become clear over the course of this book that this combination of sharpened theological interests and different genre groupings of the psalms is neither unusual nor accidental. Indeed, when one looks back through the history of the psalms' interpretation, one is struck by the way changes in the theological understanding of the psalms have often been accompanied by changes in the way the psalms have been grouped. In such a way, one can point to a history of interpretation in which theological interests go hand in hand with literary concerns.

Such a correlation of theological and literary concerns is especially intriguing in light of the present climate of biblical studies. The past few years have witnessed a revival of interest in the literary interpretation of the Bible. This literary revival is, of course, a wide ranging movement with many different manifestations. One important question, however, is the ultimate purpose of reading the Bible in a 'literary' way. Is the goal of such a reading 'aesthetic' in the sense of a general

4. The subtitle of Brueggemann's *The Message of the Psalms (A Theological Commentary)* is indicative of this change in emphasis. It is significant that both Westermann and Brueggemann have contributed Old Testament theologies to the field, something which was not a major concern for Gunkel. Gunkel instead appears to have considered himself much more of a historian of ancient Israelite religion.

enjoyment of poetic forms and literary artistry? Or is the greater appreciation of the literary aspects of the Bible only a step towards a larger goal? If so, to what extent does this goal have a theological component?

What the history of psalms interpretation helps us realize is that even though these are clearly major theoretical questions for modern interpreters, they are by no means new questions. Rather, such questions about the relationship between literary and theological issues have played a key role in the biblical interpretation of past ages. As such, looking at the historical interplay between the way that the psalms have been defined in genre terms and the way that they have been appropriated theologically allows one to put the whole question of their literary-theological relationship into a larger perspective.

In a somewhat narrower vein, an examination of the way the psalms have been defined in genre terms in the past allows one to gain some perspective on the form-critical consensus of the twentieth century. Particularly interesting in this respect is what it is that distinguished Gunkel's attempts at genre definition from those of his predecessors.

It is not, after all, that Gunkel was the first to categorize the psalms in terms of their genre. As will be seen throughout this book, genre definition has been a vital part of psalms interpretation from the earliest period. Nevertheless, Gunkel's approach differed from that of his predecessors in a number of respects, among them in his historical interests and in his concern for the ancient Israelite setting in life.

To the extent that scholars such as Westermann and Brueggemann have emphasized the theological implications of the form of the psalms, they have actually moved closer to the historical mainstream of psalms interpretation. While a post-Gunkel understanding of genre can never be the same as a pre-Gunkel understanding, looking at the differences between them seems likely to open up a number of perspectives on the state of genre definition at the present time.

Along these lines, looking at the history of psalms interpretation may help to clarify just what it is that we do when we define something as belonging to a particular genre. For all of the present century's concern with form and type, this basic question has only rarely been asked.⁵

5. Perhaps the most searching analysis of the fundamental nature of form criticism is that of Rolf Knierem in his probing article, 'Old Testament Form Criticism Reconsidered', *Int* 27 (1973), pp. 435-68. See also his more recent work, 'Criticism of Literary Features, Form, Tradition, and Redaction', in D. Knight and

And yet, as has been seen, even Gunkel's influential formulation has not prevented a number of different interpretations of the task. Given the recent innovations of Westermann and Brueggemann, the time is clearly right for a full scale examination on the most basic level.

Using the Past to Understand the Present

It will, of course, be readily apparent that by using the history of interpretation as a means of raising such theoretical questions, this study is indebted to a number of critical developments, both within the field of biblical studies and in the humanities as a whole. Within the field, one thinks especially of the attempts of Brevard S. Childs to retrieve the heritage of earlier interpreters as a theological resource for modern interpretation. His masterful Exodus commentary serves as perhaps the classic example of a thoughtful attempt to interact with the larger tradition.⁶

The same tendency may be seen in the work of such recent Jewish scholars as James Kugel and Jon Levenson, both of whom are concerned to situate their work in the wider history of interpretation.⁷ Finally, one might mention the work of such Catholic scholars as Raymond Brown and Roland Murphy who at various stages of their careers have attempted to incorporate an appreciation of the interpretive

G. Tucker (eds.), *The Hebrew Bible and its Modern Interpreters* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), pp. 136-46.

6. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974). Note Childs's assertion in the preface (p. ix) that 'an adequate interpretation of the Bible for the church must involve a continuous wrestling with the history of interpretation and theology'. Childs's work of retrieval has begun to make an impact on the field. See, for example, Brueggemann's statement of appreciation for the psalms' interpretive history in *Message of the Psalms*, pp. 16-17. One of the most insightful modern attempts to appropriate the psalms' interpretive history is that of J.L. Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994).

7. Among Kugel's many works in this vein, see his *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and its History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), and, most recently, *The Bible As It Was* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). For Levenson, see especially his *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985) with its explicit defense of the relevance of the Jewish tradition for modern interpretation. His more recent work presents a number of fine examples of this sort of approach to the text.

tradition into their picture of biblical commentary.⁸

In the wider humanities, this approach is clearly indebted to the work of such critics as Hans Georg Gadamer and Hans Robert Jauss. It was, perhaps, Gadamer whose work was the most important in opening up a positive evaluation of tradition for modern interpretation.⁹ The reception theory of Jauss is clearly indebted to Gadamer in its attention to the empirical realities of literary history and its recognition that such realities constitute a challenge to literary theory.¹⁰

Significantly, Jauss has devoted considerable attention to genre issues. As a result, his thought is often directly relevant to the present work.¹¹ This is also the case with Alastair Fowler, whose theoretical

8. One of Brown's earliest works, *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture* (Baltimore: St Mary's, 1955) directly concerned the relationship between the history of interpretation and contemporary exegesis. In his recent article on hermeneutics ('Hermeneutics', in the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* [Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990], pp. 1146-65, he notes with approval that 'an element in modern literary criticism stresses that a text once written assumes a life of its own and may convey meaning or have significance beyond the original author's intention. Thus, there is a postwritten stage that cannot be neglected either.' (p. 1147).

Much of Murphy's recent work on the Song of Songs has shown a similar openness to the history of tradition. See, for example, his article, 'Patristic and Medieval Exegesis: Help or Hindrance?', *CBQ* 43 (1981), pp. 505-516, where he notes that 'positively, the traditional interpretation supports the view, widely accepted today, that a text acquires new meaning as it lives on within a community' (p. 515). See also his commentary on the same text, *The Song of Songs* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress, 1990). For a similar interest in the different contexts of the psalms (though not without warnings against misuse), see his 'Reflections on the Contextual Interpretations of the Psalms', in J. Clinton McCann, Jr (ed.), *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter* (JSOTSup, 159; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 21-26, as well as his *The Psalms Are Yours* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993).

9. See especially the section in Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1975) which is entitled 'The Elevation of the Historicity of Understanding to the Status of Hermeneutical Principle' (pp. 235-75). Gadamer's interest in the effective-history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of a work of art is particularly relevant here.

10. Thus, the English title of Jauss's classic methodological statement: 'Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory', in his *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 3-45.

11. See, for example, his essay, 'Theory of Genres and Medieval Literature', in *Toward an Aesthetic*, pp. 76-109. It is of interest for the present work that this essay

work on genre includes a consideration of the empirical realities of interpretive history.¹² These and similar literary critics help to place the current situation in biblical studies within a larger context of critical thought.

With this in mind, one may ask what exactly one is interested in when one looks at the history of a text's interpretation down through the ages. Because the mainstream of biblical studies in this century has seen most traditional criticism as fundamentally misguided, scholars have usually understood such criticism as providing more information about the age in which it was written than about the biblical text itself. As a result, biblical scholars have been less interested in such criticism than patristic, medieval or reformation scholars.

No one would deny that the exegetical works of Augustine, Rashi and Calvin are primary sources of insight into the theological issues of their times. The real question is whether such so-called 'pre-critical' biblical interpreters have anything to contribute to an understanding of the biblical text as well as to an understanding of their own periods. It is the recognition that these older critics, despite their methodological distance from the present, are capable of providing an insight into the *text* that constitutes the new direction of such critics as Childs.

Obviously, much discretion is called for in this matter, since one cannot simply pretend that one is in the same position as a pre-critical interpreter and take over such interpretation in an unquestioning way. To say this, however, is simply to say that the modern interpreter still has a task to do, no matter how much he or she becomes open to the interpretations of the past.

The modern interpreter cannot simply appropriate the past if for no other reason than the fact that the history of past interpretation is a very diverse history. As a result, the interpreter must at the very least either pick and choose from among his or her predecessors or learn selectively from each. Even more importantly, of course, the interpreter must be responsive to his or her own time in a way similar to the way that such past interpreters were responsive to their own times.

The questions raised by this new openness to past interpretations are many and complex, and the present book is clearly incapable of

includes both an examination of the relationship between form and function and a consideration of Gunkel and the form-critical method.

12. See A. Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

exploring all of them. Instead, the present work will consider a specific issue in this interplay between past and present, namely, the implications of past genre definitions for the current task of genre analysis. With this in mind, the book of Psalms is particularly fertile ground for a number of reasons.

First of all, the book of Psalms has a very full interpretive history, one in which genre considerations have always played a vital role. Moreover, it is a book where genre concerns are very much to the fore at present and where the modern study of genre has been felt to have been particularly successful. If there is any book of the Bible well suited to the sort of analysis envisioned here, it is the book of Psalms.¹³

With this in mind, the present work will examine some of the ways in which different genre definitions of the psalms have made a difference in their interpretation throughout history. It will also, however, attempt to draw the implications of this history for the nature of genre analysis at the present time. In such a way, the book uses the historical material as a springboard for a more theoretical reflection on the present act of interpretation.

It is only fair to caution the reader that no attempt at an exhaustive study of the psalms' interpretive history is contemplated here. Such a study would take a lifetime of research in the case of the psalms. Instead, this work will use representative studies from the past to illuminate issues that seem to be of some theoretical importance at the present time. A brief outline of the main concerns of the book may help to orient the reader.

The Present Work: Reflections on Genre and the Psalms

This work's analysis of genre begins in the next chapter with a concrete example of diversity in genre definition, namely the strange case of the 'seven penitential psalms'. In the definition of Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143 as penitential psalms, one meets with one of the most ancient and sustained genre classifications in biblical literature. For at least 1500 years, a great multitude of believers have read and prayed these psalms as a distinct genre grouping with a particular character.

13. For a recent overview of the interpretive history of the psalms, see William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). Mays, *Psalms*, is also noteworthy for its attention to this history.

Such a phenomenon is clearly a significant datum for genre studies.

It is, however, the fact that this tradition of genre definition is not a unanimous one that makes these psalms of great theoretical interest for the present work. This tradition is not unanimous, on the one hand, because it is only to be found in western Christianity. Both eastern Christianity and Judaism appear to be largely unaffected by it, a circumstance which in itself raises questions about the relationship of genre definition and theological community.

It is, moreover, not unanimous because the classification of these seven psalms as penitential has been for the most part completely rejected by those who have adopted the modern form-critical approach to the psalms. Both Gunkel and Mowinckel explicitly reject this genre tradition for certain of these psalms, whereas most modern scholars simply pass over it in silence. Such a disparity between a 1500-year-old tradition and the modern methodological consensus raises exactly the kind of theoretical issues with which this book is concerned.

By focusing on the specific case of the seven penitential psalms, the second chapter hopes to raise at the most basic level the question of what is involved in the act of genre definition. How do different interpreters and their communities decide which texts should be grouped together as a common genre? What are the reasons for the differences between the genre definitions of these various interpretive communities?

Is it simply a matter of more and less perceptive readers, some of whom accurately read a text while others miss the point? Or is the act of genre definition one that allows or even demands that different readers come to different conclusions? In such a vein, one can even ask whether genre analysis is a descriptive or a constructive enterprise.

It is precisely this sort of far-reaching question that needs to be raised at the present moment of methodological searching in the field of biblical studies. It is, moreover, precisely this sort of question that is put in a larger perspective by engaging both pre-critical and critical interpretation in a constructive dialogue. The seven penitential psalms provide the perfect specific case with which to raise this sort of general question.

The chapter just described is concerned with how individual psalms are defined in genre terms. The task of psalms interpretation is, however, not finished once individual psalms are classified in this way. Indeed, recent scholars have been particularly interested in the relationship between the different types of psalms.

Along these lines, Westermann's study of praise and lament in the psalms has long been seen as a classic exploration of the relationship between psalm types. Brueggemann's conceptualization of the psalms in terms of orientation, disorientation and new orientation is more recent, though already quite influential. Clearly, in modern psalms scholarship, no psalm or psalm type is an island unto itself.

It should not, however, be imagined that this interest in the relationship between the psalms means that all of the psalms are conceived of in the same way or put on the same level. Particularly interesting in this respect is the recent tendency to emphasize the central importance of the lament. Many scholars of the last few years have seen the lament as the linchpin of the psalter, the prism through which the other types of psalms may be seen.¹⁴

The third chapter of the present work examines this recent tendency to highlight the lament with an eye towards understanding its implications for genre analysis as a whole. The wider perspective of the larger history of interpretation is particularly helpful in spelling out these implications. This wider view becomes especially significant once one realizes that ours is not the only age to have highlighted one particular psalm genre as of crucial importance for understanding the entire corpus. The fact that different ages have highlighted different psalm genres as the center of the psalms poses the issue in a particularly sharp way.

What one finds when one looks at the history of psalms interpretation is that genre definition always goes hand in hand with genre evaluation. Once again, it is the fact that both definitions and evaluations differ throughout this history that allows one to raise the most basic questions connected with the phenomenon of genre. The third chapter attempts to discern the reasons for such diversity and, in so doing, to further understand what one does when one engages in genre analysis.

As the second and third chapters imply, much of modern psalms scholarship has been devoted to the task of defining the genres of the psalms and coming to terms with how they relate to each other. Considerably less attention has been devoted to the actual way in which genre allows the different psalms to function in the lives of those who use them.

To say this does not mean that scholars have been uninterested in the way individual genres have been used, especially in their original

14. See especially Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, and also his 'The Costly Loss of Lament', *JSOT* 36 (1986), pp. 57-71.

settings in ancient Israel. This was, of course, a major concern of Gunkel, and at least some of his form-critical successors devoted considerable energy to determining the exact settings of the various psalm types.

On the other hand, much less attention has been paid to the more basic question of the way that genres actually function in these settings. To say that certain psalms are at home in particular life settings does not necessarily illuminate the personal or communal dynamics by which genre allows the psalms to be appropriated in those settings. To understand this dynamic it is crucial to look at the nature of genre itself rather than simply the nature of individual genres.

Again, modern biblical scholars have been much less likely to pursue this basic theoretical task than to pursue the more concrete task of the historical placement of individual genres. The case of Sigmund Mowinckel, one of the few scholars who was interested in both tasks, is instructive in this regard.

In his series of works on the psalms, Mowinckel first of all continued Gunkel's basic form-critical agenda of defining psalm genres and searching for their life settings in ancient Israel.¹⁵ To his great credit, he understood even more thoroughly than Gunkel the importance of the cult for understanding the role the psalms played in ancient Israel. Along these lines, he used information about other ancient Near Eastern cultures to describe what he considered to be the probable setting of many of the psalms in an Israelite new year's festival.

If this were all that Mowinckel had done, it would still have been an intellectual and scholarly achievement of considerable magnitude. Mowinckel, however, went beyond this sophisticated reconstruction of a new historical life setting for the psalms to investigate on a more basic level the personal and social dynamics involved in the cult itself. It is this more basic investigation which bears directly on the fundamental nature of genre.

As might be expected, Mowinckel's work has been much debated over the years. The debate, however, has focused mostly on the more historical question of whether Mowinckel's proposed life setting for the psalms was the correct one. In general, scholars have tended to accept

15. See S. Mowinckel, *Psalmstudien*, especially volume two, *Das Thronbesteigungsfest Jahwäs und der Ursprung der Eschatologie* (Amsterdam: Schippers, 1961 [1922]). *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962) is a useful English summary of Mowinckel's work on the psalms.